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ABSTRACT

Utah's teacher career ladder program, adopted in January 1984, differs from other states' programs in its decentralized approach. Accordingly, school districts have developed widely varying incentives, allocations of responsibilities, pay scales, and teacher evaluation procedures. Various calls for career ladders culminated in 1983 with a state-sponsored reform proposal that recommended a statewide four-step career ladder with salary increases for upper-level teachers. The final legislation, however, appropriated \$15.3 million for a voluntary program that allowed districts to create their own plans and to allocate 50 percent of their program funds to increase all teachers' contract days. Besides this requirement and the stipulations that advancement be based on "effective performance" and that districts' plans result from broad-based decisions and be subject to periodic review, few restrictions were placed on districts. To meet a May 15 deadline for submitting plans to the State Office of Education, most districts formed a single planning committee consisting of teachers, parents, administrators and school board members. Most of the plans incorporated extended contract days for all teachers and advancement based more on job enlargement than performance; inadequate teacher evaluation methods probably account for these characteristics. References are included. (MCG)

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Career Ladders in Utah:

An Initial Analysis

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Introduction

A common theme of many reform study groups was the need to design a method of teacher advancement and remuneration based on performance quality. For example, the Education Commission for the States (1983) in a review of ten major reform documents concluded that " . . . 'career paths' or 'career ladders' be established that link compensation to differentiated teaching responsibilities" (p. 5). They also concluded that the reports agreed that " . . . promotion to higher levels of responsibility should be based on systems of performance evaluation, not yet clearly defined but described in several reports as including review by fellow teachers" (p. 5). The review reported a common recommendation that educators " . . . create an equitable teacher evaluation system that periodically tests achievement and skills" (p. 7).

In response to recommendations for public school reform, several states have enacted legislation to create career ladders. The pattern to date has been statewide systems (e.g., Tennessee, California); counter to this trend is Utah which placed initiative and control at the local district level.

In 1984 the Utah legislature appropriated \$15.3 million for creation and implementation of district level career ladder systems and the Utah State Office of Education established guidelines for their development. Although participation was voluntary, each of the 47 school districts and other local agencies submitted proposals. Initial analysis of the plans show considerable diversity in ladder construction, teacher

incentives, differentiated responsibilities, remuneration plans, and teacher evaluation procedures for ladder rung placement. The plans were implemented in the 1984-85 year.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the historical antecedents to the development of career ladders in Utah, to describe characteristic of existing plans and to analyze possible trends in their development.

The Historical Context

Utah, a strongly Republican state, has been interested in the related ideas of merit pay for teachers and teacher-incentive plans since the early 1950's (Schmidt, 1984). In 1953 the legislature passed H.B. 11 which authorized funds for experimentation with compensation plans based on performance. Initially three districts were funded to experiment with merit pay plans; later two more were added. Each district was responsible for defining "good teaching," developing a system to measure it, and implementing that system to determine meritorious teachers.

Although funded until 1960, when the legislature failed to continue funding for it, the experimental merit pay project had several problems (Schmidt, 1984). The first was political; the legislature was not kept well informed of the project's status. Probably a more fundamental problem was methodological; districts had neither the expertise nor resources to successfully differentiate between good and excellent teachers. High administrative costs were one symptom of this problem.

In 1984, the Utah legislature, fueled by a number of national and

local reports again turned its attention to the idea of performance-based merit pay. In an analysis of the factors which contributed to the ultimate form of House Bill 110, researchers focused on forces both outside and within the state (Campbell et al, 1984).

Outside the state probably the most influential force was the 1983 report of The National Committee on Excellence in Education entitled, A Nation at Risk. This report called attention to the low status of the teaching profession and problems involved in attracting and holding superior teachers. Among its many recommendations were that teachers' salaries should be increased, professionally competitive, and performance based.

Also instrumental in influencing the direction of career ladders in the state was a visit to the state by Governor Lamar Alexander from the state of Tennessee. This state had taken a leadership position in the creation of career ladders and Alexander's visit to Utah helped channel reform fervor into concrete proposals for career ladders.

Proof for public interest in reform came from a public opinion poll published in August, 1983 in the Deseret News, one of the two largest papers in Utah. This poll indicated that 71 percent of the Utah citizenry either strongly favored or somewhat favored increasing taxes to improve the schools. This was in strong contrast to the 1970's when fiscally conservative voters turned down a number of school related tax referenda (Campbell et al, 1984). Newspaper editorials as well as commentaries on radio and television underscored the state's interest and commitment to some form of reform.

Probably the document most influential in translating this sentiment into concrete suggestions for career ladders was the Utah Education Reform Steering Committee's November 1983 publication Education in Utah: A Call To Action. Included in this report were a number of educational reforms including increased funding for higher education, scholarships for teachers in public education, productivity studies and 41.4 million dollars for career ladders (Campbell et al, 1984).

The career ladder recommendations in this report called for a state-wide system with four levels, beginning with initial certification and progressing through the 4th level of teacher leader. Criteria for progression through each level included the following:

- performance + evaluation of knowledge of subject matter,
- student achievement,
- classroom management techniques,
- experience,
- level of education, and
- assumption of extra responsibilities.

There were salary increases called for, ranging from \$16,000 to \$17,855 for beginning teachers to \$25,000 to \$34,900 for teacher leaders. In addition to additional responsibilities the option of a lengthened school contract year was also introduced, making the top salary for level four \$43,600. It is significant that the final bill, H. B. 110, contained provisions for a lengthened contract year and additional responsibilities, in addition to the idea of rewarding teachers for meritorious service.

Other agencies and people in the state influential in focusing public and legislative interest on career ladders included the Governor's office, a coalition of school district superintendents, college deans of education and state office of education personnel, the state Society of Superintendents, the School Board Association, and the State Office of Education. The only major non-educational group opposing the bill was the Utah Tax Payers Association, which fought the bill because of the possibility of higher taxes (Campbell et al, 1984).

Within the educational community major opposition to the idea and ultimately to H. B. 110 came from the Utah Educational Association. Their resistance centered around the following issues: 1) the linking of career ladders to merit pay, 2) the conceptual unclarity of the idea, 3) teacher resistance and 4) the lack of adequate evaluation techniques to place teachers on the ladder (Campbell et al, 1984). Though their resistance did not kill the bill their pressure was instrumental in the insertion of a provision which would allow districts to allocate up to 50% of their career ladder funds for extended contract days for all teachers. The argument made by UEA in this regard was that all teachers in the state were deserving of increased compensation.

House Bill 110: The Utah Career Ladder Bill

The final document that emerged from the Utah legislature was a five page bill which in essence authorized \$15,258,937 for district-based career ladder plans. The bill was to be administered by the State Office of

Education and funded \$860 per teacher in the state. (This was an average figure and ranged from \$770 in one district to \$912 in another.) The only major stipulation was that at least 50% of the funds were to be used for career ladder placement and that advancement on these ladders was to be based on effective performance. Other provisions were that parents, teachers and administrators be involved in the planning process in each district and that the evaluation process be fair, objective periodic, consistent, valid, etc. Significantly no specifications were made in either the Bill or in subsequent State Office guidelines in the following areas:

- 1) the size and type of monetary and non-monetary incentives and rewards,
- 2) number of career ladder steps,
- 3) uses of student achievement data as criteria for incentives,
- 4) the use of discrepancy or goal-free evaluation models,
- 5) the degree of parent and teacher involvement in planning and implementation,
- 6) whether step movement criteria should be based on extra duties or classroom excellence,
- 7) degrees of direct parent, student and peer evaluation.

Presumably the desire to provide maximum local initiation and flexibility influenced policy makers to leave the guidelines as broad and vague as possible. An alternate interpretation was that the more specific the guidelines became the more likely they were to engender resistance and

the more difficult they would be to implement in diverse settings. (Utah's 40 school districts range in size from one with 193 students and three schools to one with 62,129 students and 81 schools.)

Implementation

House Bill 110 was passed on January 20, 1984 on the last day of the legislative session. From there it went to the State Office of Education for Implementation. Their guidelines required that districts requesting career ladders submit an operational plan by May 15, 1984. Under extenuating circumstances this deadline was extended but most districts submitted plans by the May 15 deadline.

A survey of superintendents during the planning process revealed the following trends (Career Ladders Work Group, 1984). Most districts had formed a single committee to develop the plan and these committees consisted (in order of numbers) of teachers, parents, administrators and school board members. Most plans included provisions for additional teacher responsibilities and extended work calendars. The major problem areas encountered by the planning committees had to do with evaluating teacher performance and ways of integrating student progress into these evaluations (a vaguely worded element of the bill that has been interpreted by districts in a multitude of ways).

An Initial Analysis

Two major trends emerged from an initial analysis conducted by the State Office of Education of the district career ladder plans submitted. These relate to the use of extended contract days and the criteria used for career ladder placement (Schmidt and Winget, 1984). In the area of extended contract days 19 of 47* educational units (or 40% opted for the maximal 50% allocation for extended contract days, while an additional 16 units (or 34%) opted for using 40% or above of the career ladder funds for extended days. Only four of the 47 units opted for 100% allocation for advancement versus extended days, and these were either small districts or special service units. The clear trend was to implement the legislation in the direction of egalitarian versus meritocratic principles. The reasons for this may be political as well as technical, i.e., problems involved in differentiating or evaluating teachers (see Peterson, 1984; and Peterson and Kauchak, 1982).

The other major trend in the career ladder plans was the practice of placing teachers on rungs of career ladder plans on the basis of added responsibility rather than superior teaching. The added responsibilities include such things as school coordinator for the gifted, remedial tutoring, grade or subject area leader, curriculum development and teacher mentor. Probably the best explanation for this trend is the same offered above, the primitive state of teacher evaluation practices.

*In addition to the original 40 districts, 7 other educational units (e.g., schools for the deaf and blind and vocational units) were added.

Most units (47%) opted for three leveled career ladders while 36% opted for four levels. Two units included two levels in their plans and one included five. Of those that had three levels the predominant pattern was beginning, regular and master teacher.

Trends for the Future

The future of career ladder plans in Utah is uncertain, and will depend on a number of forces. Perhaps the most important will be the extent to which the legislature assesses the career ladders as improving education in the state. Critical here will be their perception of to what extent the various career ladders systems in the state did indeed reward or promote good teaching.

A second factor critical in the state will be the experiences and reactions of teachers and districts in the state in implementing the plans. At the present time it is too early to tell what these final reactions will be, but it is safe to report that the initial reaction of these groups to career ladders has not been overwhelmingly positive. Much of this hesitation is understandable; career ladders are a significant change and the level of funding was not excessive. How all of the social and political forces will interact in the next few months to influence the next state legislature will be interesting and instructive to watch.

Fundamental to any informed decision by the legislature is adequate information concerning the progress of career ladders in Utah. Toward

this end the State Office of Education has funded a research project by the Career Ladder Research Group in the School of Education at the University of Utah. This project will further analyze the career ladder plans and conduct case studies in six representative districts. This project is scheduled for completion in December 1984.

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